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Citizenship and Religion in the Post-Yugoslav States

Milja Radović

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University of Edinburgh, School of Law
The Europeanisation of Citizenship in the Successor States of the Former Yugoslavia
(CITSEE)

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Citizenship and Religion in the Post-Yugoslav States

Milja Radović, University of Edinburgh¹

Abstract

In this paper I explore the ways in which religion and religious institutions impact citizenship regimes in the post-Yugoslav states, both explicitly and implicitly. I approach citizenship as membership and through the dimension of identity. The issue of identity, as I will show in this paper, has been at the core of the triadic nexus of political community, ethnic belonging and religious affiliation, which has had further impacts on the understanding of political membership, and the definitions of who belongs and how.

Keywords: Religion, identity, membership, ethnocentrism, ethnophyletism

1 Introduction

In this paper I focus on the complex interaction between religion and citizenship regimes in the post-Yugoslav states. I approach citizenship as *membership* through the dimension of *identity* (as defined by Christian Joppke 2007). Joppke distinguishes between citizenship as status, rights, and identity; the latter “refers to the behavioural aspects of individuals acting and conceiving themselves as members of a collectivity, classically the nation.”² The task of this paper is to identify the ways in which religion and religious institutions impact on citizenship regimes in the post-Yugoslav states, if not explicitly upon their formal constitutional and legal definitions, then certainly implicitly upon the political practices shaped by the specific, ethnocentric understanding of political membership.

I shall argue in this paper that at the heart of the triadic nexus of political community, ethnic belonging and religious affiliation, is the issue of identity that is pertinent for the concepts of membership and citizenship.

Both membership in the religious community and membership in the political community in the former Yugoslav states, as I will show in this paper, have been intertwined with ethnic belonging. In the case of post-Yugoslav states, membership and identity do not “part ways”³ but on the contrary supplement each other. Even in the states that are recognized as multi-national or civic, ethnocentrism still prevails in the understandings of political membership of particular groups (to the exclusion of others). I argue that religion has had a crucial role in the conceptualization of the

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² Christian Joppke, “Transformation of Citizenship: Status, Rights, Identity”, *Citizenship Studies*, 11:1 (2007), 37-48, 38.

³ Joppke, “Transformation of Citizenship”, 38.

identities of post-Yugoslav political communities and has strongly influenced the understandings of political membership. Religion does not only impact on the ideas of membership but consequently also influences the understandings of status and rights.

2 Religion, ethnicity and political communities

Religion and citizenship focus on similar questions of membership and belonging. In the post-Yugoslav states, as in some other contexts, ethnonational identity preceded political/institutional/territorial polity. Belonging and membership in specific ethnic community has often been confirmed in the public space in two ways: politically and religiously, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but on the contrary they are frequently moulded by each other.

Rogers Brubaker regards religion and nationalism as *analogous phenomena*⁴, connecting both to more general social structures and processes. As I will show below, in the Balkan states, religion and nationalism were often in conjunction with each other – processes such as politicization of culture⁵ through implementation of ethno-religious narratives led to very specific views and understandings of polity.

The tension and interrelation between religious and political shows in the concepts of political membership: for instance, in the post-Yugoslav states, membership in a specific political community defined by ethnicity (that is often in majority within the entire community based on citizenship as legal status), has been often expressed through religious symbols that became embedded in state symbols.

In the former Yugoslavia, the political revival of religion started in the mid-1980s, concurrently with the prominence of nationalist ideologies at the moment when the question of national identity became one of the central political issues. Religion and religious institutions have been essential for structuring national identity. The Orthodox and Catholic Church came to be seen as a supreme moral, political and spiritual authority that defines both *ethnos* and *demos*.

The Catholic Church in Croatia, or “the church of Croats”, became in the 1990s a strong element of Croatian nationalism. It portrayed its role as crucial in ‘preserving national identity’ during socialist and supra-national Yugoslavia. Throughout the 1980s religious celebrations conducted both by the Serbian Orthodox Church and Catholic Church became signifiers of ‘national awakening’ and a channel for nationalist euphoria. Both churches conducted massive religious celebrations. One held in Croatia in the national shrine of Marija Bistrica gathered, according to

⁴ Rogers Brubaker, “Religion and Nationalism: Four Approaches”, *Nations and Nationalism* 18:1 (2012), 2–20, 4.

⁵ Politicisation of culture has been directly connected with *politicized religion* and its close relation to nationalism. And politicized religion, as Brubaker argues, claims to restructure public life in accordance to religious principles. Brubaker, “Religion and Nationalism”, 6.

the church, almost “half a million pilgrims.”⁶ The National Eucharistic Congress, opened on the 8th of September by papal legate, followed by vigils, had the aim of presenting the history of Croatian people as a Catholic nation, emphasising the close links between the church, nationhood and statehood. In those narratives, Croatian people were labelled as “the people of God.”⁷ In a similar way, the 600th anniversary of the Kosovo battle in 1989 represented the beginning of a new era in the relationship between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the state. This event that the official media characterized as the biggest gathering of Serbs in the century, meant not only that nationalists had taken power, but that in that distribution of power the church would maintain an important role as the main ‘keeper’ and ‘protector’ of Serbian national identity.

The introduction of religion into the political sphere signified the power that religion will have for the definitions of membership in new national states. At that time it was already clear that for the Church, both Catholic and Orthodox, the concept of membership from the religious point of view, was reduced to an ethnic dimension: the members, or the potential members of the Church, are considered as either ethnic Croats or Serbs. The wider understanding of political membership has been shaped on a similar model of belonging to the same ethnic group.

2.1. *Ethnocentrism and Ethnophyletism*

Glorification of one’s ethnic belonging by the church is called ethnophyletism⁸, which I argue has had large influence on the political communities. Although this term was coined in the Orthodox Church I am using it here as a wider concept, because of its proximity to the concept of ‘religious nationalism’ in a wider sense. The term – ethnophyletismos (Εθνοφυλετισμός) can be translated as *national tribalism*, and it basically means the rejection of the concept of the *universal* in favour of the national and a belief in a “nation’s pre-eminent place under God.”⁹

We could say that ethnophyletism in religious language stands for what ethnocentrism similarly represents in the political domain. When we speak about ethnocentrism we are coming from the perspective of the political community, while ethnophyletism refers to the religious perspective of membership in the religious community: they can mutually shape each other. These two concepts in the Balkans link in a peculiar way: ethnophyletism is not an isolated phenomenon, as it is precisely through this concept that the Church expresses its ethnocentric understanding of modern state and nationhood. I argue that ethnophyletism

⁶ Vjekoslav Perica, *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 68.

⁷ Ibid, 71.

⁸ Ethnophyletism has been particularly condemned by Orthodox Churches as it does not reflect the universal dimension of Orthodox Christianity but idolizes the nation.

⁹ Eris Waver Beckett, *National Narcissism: The Intersection of Nationalist Cult and Gender in Hungary* (Bern: Peter Lang, International Academic Publishers, 2006), 159.

supports ethnocentrism. Ethnophyletism represents 'ethnification of the sacred', which is usually followed by the 'sacralisation of the profane': the nation derives its 'sacredness' from religion itself. This is not characteristic only for the Orthodox Church, but for all major religious communities, which is precisely the reason why religion is such a powerful agent for building the nation's cultural and political identity. The fine links between ethnophyletism and ethnocentrism have been exposed through a number of identitarian narratives.

2.2. Identitarian Narratives

Identities are "created, transmitted, revised and undermined" through particular narratives.¹⁰ Ethno-religious narratives have been essential for nation-building processes and reinforcement of ethnicity in the political sphere. In a number of ethno-religious narratives the nation is perceived as an 'eternal' concept, beyond time and history. The discourse used in those narratives that aims to emphasize the national specificity is the religious language: for instance, the notion of "the national soul"¹¹, an abstract term with religious connotation, has been exploited both by politicians and church leaders. Identitarian narratives have also targeted the 'foreign Other': in Serbia, against Muslims and Catholics, who were portrayed as enemies of Orthodox Serbs. Bosniak nationalism has been based on premises of protection of Bosniak Muslim identity in Bosnia, endangered by Serbian or Croatian nationalists. Croats started portraying themselves as *antemuralia christianitatis* and the others as Balkanic barbarians that are endangering Croatia's place in Central Europe and, generally, in Western Europe, the place secured by their belonging to the Western Church. Historical revisionism, victimization and vilification as a part of 'historical memory', became part of those narratives, which were to a great extent formed by the religious institutions.¹² By the end of the war national-religious narratives were deeply embedded in state symbols, and religious rituals once shifted from 'sacred space' into the terrain of the profane, became a part of public rituals, intertwined with the official state celebrations.

Identitarian politics have also been reflected through constitutional nationalism.¹³ Despite the constitutions being secular and not religious, it is this triadic nexus between political community, ethnic belonging and religious affiliation that allows this to happen, pulling resources from the religious and ethnic in order to reinforce a particular notion of the political. For instance, both Croatian¹⁴ and Serbian

¹⁰ Richard Ned Lebow, *The Politics and Ethics of Identity: In Search of Ourselves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 46.

¹¹ Anthony D. Smith, *Theories of Nationalism* (London: Duckworth, 1971), 23.

¹² See Grupa autora, *Jagnje Božije i Zvijer iz Bezdana*, available at:

<http://ponude.biz/knjige/j/jagnje%20Bozije%20i%20zvijer%20iz%20bezdana.pdf>

¹³ Robert M. Hayden, "Constitutional Nationalism in the Formerly Yugoslav Republics", *Slavic Review*, 51:4 (1992), 654-673.

¹⁴ <http://www.zakon.hr/z/94/Ustav-Republike-Hrvatske>.

constitutions¹⁵ in the first place define their states as states of Croatian/Serbian people, while the constitution of BiH, as already mentioned, recognizes only three constitutive nations: Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats. Ethnicity has been frequently proven through religious affiliation and for some time in Croatia, for instance, “Catholic Church certificates were also accepted by state authorities”¹⁶ as a sufficient proof of Croatian ethnicity for the purposes of citizenship acquisition. The new Serbian Constitution from 2006 takes identity as something that exists even before birth¹⁷, and thus it is not surprising that in post-Milošević Serbia identitarian politics have been formalized through a number of state symbols: the flag, the royal coat of arms, and national anthem that testify to the introduction of religious into political / public sphere.

Further, identitarian narratives support forms of ‘transborder nationalism’,¹⁸ in which religious institutions frequently engage. The disputes over territories have been frequently backed-up by religious leaders. For example, in the territories where the Serbian Orthodox Church is historically present, such as Montenegro and Kosovo, claims for preservation of Serbian national identity have frequently masked territorial aspirations. How political communities understand and perceive membership has changed over the years, together with the changing and creation of the borders of the new states. None the less identitarian narratives of the religious institutions shaped the perceptions of political membership that was frequently perceived as a religious-ethnic territorial-bonded notion.

3 Religion and citizenship in Montenegro, Serbia and BiH

In this section, I will analyse the influences of religion and religious institutions on political communities in three different contexts in which citizenship is interpreted as civic, ethnocentric, and multi-ethnic. My analysis is focussed upon: 1) the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the dispute over ‘Montenegrin identity’ in the Referendum for Independence in 2006, and the 2011 Census; 2) The influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church on the Serbian political community in the dispute over Kosovo’s independence in 2008 and its influence on the perception of demos through identitarian narratives of the Kosovo myth; 3) Ethno-confessional identity and political membership in BiH, including the relationship between Bosniak nation-building and Islamic Community. What is common for all three cases is that in spite of the different contexts religion has been a) an important political agent in defining

¹⁵ <http://www.ustavni.sud.rs/page/view/sr-Latn-CS/70-100028/ustav-republike-srbije>.

¹⁶ Francesco Ragazzi, Igor Štiks, Viktor Koska, “Country Report: Croatia”, *EUDO Citizenship Observatory*, 2013, 8. Available at: <http://eudo-citizenship.eu/docs/CountryReports/Croatia.pdf>.

¹⁷ Jelena Vasiljević, “Citizenship and belonging in Serbia: in the crossfire of changing nationhood narratives”, *CITSEE Working Paper 2011/17*. Available at:

http://www.citsee.ed.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/108908/327_citizenshipandbelonginginserbiainthecrossfireofchangingnationhoodnarratives.pdf

¹⁸ See Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5.

or influencing the criteria of membership in the national polity; b) a tool for nation-building; c) by the practice of ethnophyletism empowering general ethnocentrism (both on state and sub-state levels). More concretely, I explore the influence that religious institutions have had on political communities at the times when specific ethno-religious identities have been considered as being 'endangered' by 'external' factors.

3.1. The dispute between two churches in Montenegro: referendum and census

Montenegro became an independent state in 2006 out of the "dissolution of two federations and one state union."¹⁹ As Džankić argues, Montenegrin politics since the 1990s until 2006 was marked by eternal divisions equally over the issue of independence and national identity.²⁰ The issue of the identity of Montenegrins as either "a separate nation" or Serbian "sub-group" predominated on the political scene and in post-2006 remained one of the central issues for the Orthodox Metropolitanate of Montenegro – an eparchy of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The issue of defining demos and members of the polity became a crucial issue for the church. After 2006, the process of "nationalizing" the state had direct consequences on citizenship policies, which as Džankić points out became "tools of political manoeuvring."²¹ The re-construction of Montenegrin nationhood was marked by diverging from Serbian nationalism, and the creation of specific national-religious identity through the formation of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church in 1993, and later on the Montenegrin language. The dispute between the two Orthodox churches in Montenegro reveals deep conflicts over Montenegrin identity and consequently the understanding of political membership in Montenegro and states in general.

The Orthodox Metropolitanate centred in Cetinje, the former capital of Montenegro, is one of the four metropolitanates of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Although Montenegro has a de jure civic citizenship regime,²² the concepts of belonging have been built upon two polarized identitarian politics embodied in two churches: Montenegrin and Serbian, as one of the main competing actors in communicating political identities of Montenegro. The conflict of "dual identities"²³ transferred into the field of religion. Religion became one of the most important sources for defining competing identities, and a tool for nation-building. For the Serbian Church the Montenegrin nation was a communist invention. The involvement of the Serbian Metropolitanate in political matters closely related to the

¹⁹ Jelena Džankić, "Lineages of Citizenship in Montenegro", *CITSEE Working Paper 2010/14*, 1.

Available at:

http://www.citsee.ed.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/108877/371_lineagesofcitizenshipinmontenegro.pdf

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 2.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

issues of cultural and national identity and statehood has been somewhat resourced from the tradition of theocracy²⁴, when the ecclesiastical authorities were at the same time the rulers of Montenegro, in order to preserve a specific autochthonous identity in the face of the Ottoman Empire. The Orthodox Church relied upon this tradition in legitimizing its political role in contemporary Montenegrin society, at the same time proclaiming itself as a 'preserver and defender' of Serbian identity in Montenegro.

Since the 1990s, the Metropolitanate developed and established itself as one of the crucial political players, not only in Montenegro but in neighbouring Serbia. The close links between the Metropolitanate and some of the political structures in Montenegro, Serbia, and Serbian leaders in BiH, renewal of the eparchial institutions, and various religious-political activities often on the edge of controversy, led to self-recognition of Metropolitanate as a defender of 'Serbian identity'. The Metropolitanate has been politically active since the early 1990s, and put significant effort into its attempt to justify the war operations in former Yugoslavia and particularly the aggression against BiH. Its discourse was always anti-Western and anti-European and quite frequently its leader did not try to hide his support and admiration for war criminals.²⁵ It is not surprising that the Serbian Metropolitan of Montenegro has been seen as one of the most radical right-wing bishops of the Serbian Church. Furthermore, it is worth saying that the Metropolitan of Montenegro has an honorary title of "the exarch of the holy throne of Peć", which is meant to signify close, almost 'organic', links with Kosovo – 'the cradle of Serbdom'. Precedence of the Metropolitan in relation to Kosovo, even on a symbolic level, has been particularly exploited for the political purposes and strengthening of Serbian national identity in Montenegro.

A number of the Metropolitanate's activities, such as reconstruction of the Njegoš' Chapel (Njegoševa Kapela) on the mountain Lovćen²⁶, or the placing of a metal church on the mountain Rumija using an army helicopter, on both symbolical and political levels aimed to re-confirm multi-ethnic Montenegro as a Serbian land. Identitarian narratives had a similar function of reinforcing the sense of Serbian national identity and, more importantly, preventing alienation from the ethnic concept of the state. Those narratives constructed upon mythical language and epic poetry, promoted the 'Serbdom of Montenegrin warriors' as the essence of

²⁴ Bishops of the house of Petrović were at the same time the rulers of Montenegro.

²⁵ Metropolitan Amfilohije who was the biggest critic of the Hague Tribunal claiming that it was formed to put only Serbs on trial, has openly admitted that he was offering shelter to Radovan Karadžić in 1995, saying that Montenegro was always a 'shelter of hajduks', See: Dimitrije Jovičević, "Mitropolit Amfilohije priznao: Nudio sam utočište Karadžiću", *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 30 July 2013. Available at:

http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/srpska_pravoslavna_crkva_amfilohije_karadzic_mladic/24093460.html.

²⁶ The new chapel designed by Ivan Mestrovic re-opened in 1974, the church characterized as 'mausoleum of pharaoh' unworthy of Njegoš. Savo Gregorovic, "Amfilohije: Crkva Njegoševa a ne kraljeva", *Vecernje Novosti*, 30 June 2012. Available at:

<http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/planeta.300.html:386437-Amfilohije-Crkva-Njegoseva-a-ne-kraljeva>

Montenegrin identity. Religious identitarian narratives have been constructed on a dichotomous relationship between Self and foreign 'Other' embodied either in 'West', Catholics, or Muslims. Anti-Europeanism as well as 'anti-Montenegrinism' is thus based on the same 'transcendental' discourse of holiness of Serbs that is endangered by others from communists to European multiculturalists. As in the epics, the community is understood as a community of blood rather than political community²⁷: membership is thus confirmed through the ethno-religious belonging which leaves the 'eternal Other' in the category of 'mythical enemy'.

On the other hand, the Montenegrin Orthodox Church established in 1993 is not canonically recognized by other orthodox churches; nonetheless it became one of the main tools of the nation-building process. Montenegrin nationalism is closely connected with the new Montenegrin church. Although a counter-reaction to Serbian nationalism and the radicalism of the Metropolitanate, it is not ethnically neutral but based on similar premises as the one it tries to annul. The newly established Church claimed that the sovereignty and unique ethnic-cultural tradition of Montenegrins had been 'invaded' by Serbs. 'Montenegrism' thus replaced Serbian nationalism, and a battle for Montenegrin cultural-national identity became a religious matter. As Perica argues, "Montenegro will become a full-fledged nation...not when the great powers say so, but when the Orthodox Church of Montenegro is granted autocephaly by other Orthodox churches."²⁸ The dispute between the churches spread from canonical onto the issue of Montenegrin language which Serbian Metropolitan called an "artificial language"²⁹ whose introduction aims to destroy the Serbian national identity of Montenegrins.

When identity has been perceived to be endangered by external political circumstances or pressures, identitarian narratives have been particularly used in the public sphere; the Serbian Metropolitanate has entered into an open conflict with what it perceived as the 'pro-Montenegrin' political establishment. On two occasions, first in response to the referendum in 2006 and then in response to the 2011 census, the church was particularly active in appealing to polity members. The Serbian Orthodox Church was the biggest opponent of Montenegrin independence. Since for the Metropolitanate, the Montenegrin nation was a "product of a communist anti-Serbian doctrine"³⁰, the 2006 Referendum was followed by the reproduction of a number of narratives about a historical connection between Serbia and Montenegro,

²⁷ See Andrew Wachtel, "Citizenship and Belonging: Literary Themes and Variations from Yugoslavia", *CITSEE Working Paper 2010/12*, 2. Available at: http://www.citsee.ed.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0011/108875/228_citizenshipandbelongingliterarythemesandvariationsfromyugoslavia.pdf.

²⁸ Perica, *Balkan Idols*, 216.

²⁹ "Amfilohije: Crnogorski jezik izmišljen", *RTS*, 14 January 2011. Available at: <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/11/Region/826460/Amfilohije%3A+Crnogorski+jezik+izmi%C5%A1ljen.html>.

³⁰ My translation. See Aleksandar Stamatović, *Kratka istorija mitropolije crnogorsko-primorske (1219-1999), Glava VII Mitropolit Amfilohije Radovic i nase vrijeme, Projekat Rastko*. Available at: http://www.rastko.rs/rastko-cg/povijest/istorijat/istorijat_1.html.

referring to historic figures from the Montenegrin past. Calling Montenegro the “urn of tzar Dušan’s ashes”³¹, was an attempt by the Serbian Metropolitanate to convince citizens of the existence of a natural bond between two sister states and the common ethnic-religious-cultural identity. Nonetheless, independence was not the biggest issue for the church as Montenegro was independent in different historical periods; it was precisely the question of ethno-religious identity that remained the central issue. In other words, the Church focussed upon the questions of: who are the members, what is their identity, who constitutes the demos and therefore dictates the cultural-religious identity of the new independent state. The battle for identity continued, and it became clear that for both competing sides, pro-Serbian led by the Serbian Metropolitanate, and pro-Montenegrin led by the Government and political parties of which some were closely linked to Montenegrin church, the concept of political membership was strongly based on ethno-religious identity.

Just before the Census in 2011, the Serbian Metropolitan called a meeting of the pro-Serbian political parties in one of the Montenegrin monasteries³², also inviting the Serbian ambassador. During the ‘census campaign’ in 2011 the Metropolitan appealed to citizens not to be afraid to declare themselves as ethnic Serbs, in spite of the numerous pressures of the officials.³³ The Metropolitanate emphasized that the Serbian church and language have been victims of the Montenegrin nationalism and the ongoing anti-Serbian campaign. After the Census, the Metropolitanate appealed to its members that there is “no permanent identity” and invited citizens to remain in the church as the only source of permanent identity.³⁴ On the other hand, politicization and restrictiveness in the acquisitions of citizenship as the means of consolidating internal divisions³⁵ for the Serbian Church was a political act aimed to ‘control identity’ by making a number of the clergy foreign citizens.³⁶

Membership, especially through practices and applied policies, is still perceived as membership in a particular nation/ethnicity with a specific linguistic and religious tradition. The Serbian Orthodox Metropolitanate has shown that religious nationalism and ethnophyletism are deeply rooted in the church. On the other side, the example of the Montenegrin Church, a new political agent on the scene with its own ‘nation-building agenda’, and the support it has received from the

³¹ My translation. “Prpić veliki i mali”, *Peščanik*, 19 May 2006. Available at:

http://www.b92.net/info/emisije/pescanik.php?yyyy=2006&mm=05&nav_id=198498.

³² “Mitropolit Amfilohije sa liderima srpskih partija”, *RTV*, 8 February 2011. Available at:

http://rtv.co.rs/sr_lat/region/mitropolit-amfilohije-sa-liderima-srpskih-partija_237762.html

³³ Miodrag Vuković, “Popis u Crnoj gori: sve je dignuto na noge što može hodati”, *Nova srpska politicka misao*. Available at: <http://www.nspm.rs/srbija-i-crna-gora/popis-u-crnoj-gori.html?alphabet=I>

³⁴ “Amfilohije: Ovdje nemamo postojana grada, a time ni identiteta”, *Vijesti online*, 21 April 2011.

Available at: <http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/amfilohije-ovdje-nemamo-postojana-grada-a-time-ni-identiteta>

³⁵ Džankić, “Lineages of Citizenship in Montenegro”, 21.

³⁶ See Velibor Dzomić, “Srpska crkva i ‘nova politika’”, *Novi Standard*, 25 January 2013.

<http://www.standard.rs/dr-velibor-dzomic-srpska-crkva-i-nova-politika.html>

pro-Montenegrin citizens, shows that the church is in a way 'expected' by the polity to embrace the role of a keeper of national identity. In both cases membership in the church defines national identity. The battle over the demos in the religious sphere reveals the ethnocentric tendencies of the otherwise constitutionally 'civic state'.

3.2. Kosovo and the Serbian Orthodox Church - dispute over territory, identity and membership

The Kosovo myth has been central for the religious-national narratives of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Kosovo myth was the basis on which the church and nationalists constructed strong identitarian narratives that were essential for Serbian nationalism, and decisive for further definitions of nationhood, state, society and culture. Since the 1980s the 28th of June, the date of the Kosovo battle, has been a date with a symbolic-mythological meaning for Serbs, or at least for the church and populist press. When Milošević was arrested and delivered to The Hague on the same date, church leaders compared it to the betrayal in Kosovo, but others noted that Milošević's rule started and finished around the same mythological date. Kosovo was the reason for the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) in 1999, and continuously has been one of the central political issues both for politicians and the church.

The Kosovo myth thus remained the most exploited myth in the recent Serbian history, both by the state and the church. In 2006 it was precisely because of the Kosovo issue that the Serbian Parliament adopted a new Constitution, in which Kosovo was defined as an integral part of Serbia. In this way, the government condemned any future independence of Kosovo as an illegal act. When Kosovo declared its independence in 2008, the Serbian Orthodox Church was one of the most important political actors to place pressure on state institutions, politicians and the public for the preservation of Kosovo's territory. After the landmark agreement between Kosovo and Serbian politicians was signed in 2013, the Church expressed its disagreement with the official political actors, initiating a boycott of Serbian politicians in Kosovo. In both cases the Serbian Church acted as political agent and supreme authority in the issues of the territory, Serbian identity and demos in Kosovo.

The impacts and importance of the Kosovo myth have been analysed by a number of scholars, as an inevitable topic in studies on Serbian nationalism and nationhood narratives. Among many aspects of the Kosovo Myth, one is of particular interest for this paper, and that is how through the narratives of the Kosovo myth, specific understandings of belonging and membership are defined and transferred onto political communities. A battle over political space through identitarian narratives of Kosovo as a 'heart of Serbia' has influenced the understandings of citizenship in a sense that the political membership is perceived as belonging to the specific ethnic-religious group who should remain within the boundaries of a 'mother-state'.

The concept of belonging that stems from Kosovo myth ideology is two-dimensional: it is a territorial matter, as well as a matter of ethnicity, ethics and religion. Religious narratives of the Kosovo Myth have focussed upon the legend of a choice given to the 13th century Prince Lazar between the 'kingdom of earth' and 'kingdom of heaven' and the 'covenant' between the Serbian people and God. It is the "deep symbolism" of Kosovo that enabled the multi-dimensionality of its rhetoric: more than one historical and political reality, religious and ethical dimension.³⁷ Precisely because of its deep symbolic level the construction of Self and Other has not changed – although a "historical referent" may change, the "initial historical differentiation"³⁸ remains. As a 'Serbian Jerusalem'³⁹ and the place where Serbs chose the 'kingdom of heaven', Kosovo remained symbolically and thus territorially important.

Belonging to Serbian nation implies belonging to Orthodoxy, from which the nation derives its sacredness and that at the same time shapes its cultural and spiritual specificity and identity. Kosovo for the church and politicians became thus not only the territory where Serbs live (though in minority), but the territory that is marked as a "cradle of the nation"⁴⁰ to which therefore the nation has a historical right.

The Kosovo religious-national narrative has been translated into political language and has strongly influenced political communities in Serbia. Those narratives were particularly exploited in 2008 when Kosovo proclaimed its independence. The proclamation of independence was marked by a series of protests, in Serbia, BiH (in the Republic of Srpska entity), and abroad. The protest under the name "Kosovo is Serbia" held in Belgrade united church and political leaders, and although initially announced as peaceful demonstrations, ended with street riots and the burning of many Western embassies, including the US Embassy.⁴¹ Narratives of Kosovo as the holy land and the 'sacredness' of the Serbian nation marked the protests revealing what Bakic-Hayden calls "the reality of Kosovo

³⁷ See Milica Bakic-Hayden, "Kosovo: Reality of a Myth and Myth of Many Realities", in Luka Walter et al (eds), *Serbien und Montenegro* (Vienna: Österreichische Osthefte, 2006), 133-43.

³⁸ Ibid, 143.

³⁹ The words from the Psalm 137: "If I forget thee o Jerusalem let my right hand forget her cunning" were used many times by the Church leaders, the last time by Serbian Patriarch Irinej who at the celebration of Christmas in 2013 greeted the faithful with the words "If I forget thee o Kosovo and Metohija, let my right hand forget my cunning". "Bozic mira i radosti", *Vecernje novosti*, 7 January 2013. Available at: <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/aktuelno.290.html:413655-Bozic-mira-i-radosti>.

⁴⁰ See "Odrzan miting: Kosovo je Srbija", *B92*, 21 September 2008. Available at: http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2008&mm=02&dd=21&nav_category=640&nav_id=285780.

⁴¹ "Protestors attack U.S. Embassy in Belgrade", *New York Times*, 22 February 2008. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/22/world/europe/22kosovo.html?_r=0.

tradition" as a powerful source of national mobilization and in that sense more than an "unreal construction."⁴²

Since 2008 the Serbian Church has remained the strongest opponent to any political agreements with Kosovo's authorities. The problem of Kosovo became again one of the central political issues in Serbia. The anti-Western and anti-European discourse, the divisions on 'martyrs and traitors' prevailed in media and church discourse influencing also the political scene; the pro-European Democratic Party (DS) launched its political programme under the slogan "both Kosovo and Europe".⁴³ Partition of Kosovo, with the North of Kosovo of majority Serbian population integrating with Serbia, has been seen as one of the possibilities that would bring 'unification of the Serbian being.' The mythological language used by the radical politicians and the church presented the territorial issue as a cultural and spiritual matter, and the 1990s narratives of "all Serbs in one state" re-emerged, this time as a matter of spiritual identity. Kosovo independence has been thus perceived and represented as the last attack of the 'West' against Serbian unique identity and culture. Shortly before the deadline for the Serbian Government by the EU in April 2013, Serbian Orthodox Church appealed to the public with the words that "Kosovo is too high a price to pay for the EU"⁴⁴ putting the pressure on ruling coalition. In one of its official letters to the Government, the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church made this appeal:

"It is perfectly clear to every reasonable man that the Western powers, after the NATO bombing war [in 1999] are step-by-step creating the state of Kosovo for Kosovo Albanians while getting Serbia to act as their accomplice... cutting her jugular and taking *its heart from its bosom, her holy land of Kosovo and Metohija*."⁴⁵

After the agreement between Serbia and Kosovo was signed, several of the most radical church leaders reacted strongly against the Serbian government⁴⁶, which led to further (though small) protests. Right wing parties and a number of the church leaders characterized the signing of the agreement as a betrayal.⁴⁷

⁴² See Bakic-Hayden, "Kosovo", 143.

⁴³ "Tadić: Potvrđena politika 'I Evropa i Kosovo'", *Blic online*, 24 February 2012. Available at: <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Politika/308827/Tadic-Potvrđena-politika-I-Evropa-i-Kosovo>.

⁴⁴ See "Kosovo too high a price to pay for EU, Serbian church says", *Reuters*, 6 April 2013. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/06/us-serbia-kosovo-church-idUSBRE93508720130406>.

⁴⁵ My italics. Bojana Barlovac, "Serbian Church Accuses Govt of 'Suicide' on Kosovo", *Balkan Insight*, n.d. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbian-orthodox-church-criticizes-state-on-kosovo-policy>.

⁴⁶ "Šokantan čin Amfilohija i Atanasija", *B92*, 10 May 2013. Available at: http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2013&mm=05&dd=10&nav_category=640&nav_id=712599.

⁴⁷ See <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:430258-Reakcije-na-potpisivanje-sporazuma-Beograda-i-Pristine>; <http://mojahercegovina.com/vladika-atanasije-u-beogradu-ova-trojica-na-vlasti-su-izdajnici-koji-veruju-u-garancije-nato-a/>.

The Kosovo theme that “has had a number of variations over the centuries” has remained at the heart of ethno-religious narratives and has been essential for what Bakić-Hayden called a “hybrid form” of Kosovo Myth embodied in “ethnonationalism and populism.”⁴⁸ I argue that there are two crucial aspects that stem from the Kosovo Myth narratives: ethnophyletism and ethnocentrism, which has direct impacts on political membership and citizenship in Serbia. Membership is perceived as belonging to the ‘holy community’ and demos is in this sense defined by the national-religious belonging, which is to be included into the territorial borders. Territory is symbolically perceived as a ‘body’ of the holy nation which cannot function without its “jugular” - Kosovo. Kosovo is essential for the identitarian politics of the church as it is a marker of Serbian identity that is defined through ‘belonging to Christ’, or his church.

In those narratives demos is understood as a “community of Orthodox Serbs”, and moved into the mythic sphere. Political membership, equality of all citizens, is confused with the concepts of belonging to a ‘sacred nation’. It comes as no surprise then that Serbian citizenship regime, similarly to Croatian one, offers a privileged access to citizenship to all Serbs, ‘in the region and abroad’.

3.3. BiH and the ethno-confessional identity as a basis of political membership

In Bosnia, just as in the rest of the Balkans, religious institutions gained a significant role through the Ottoman Empire’s system of *millets*, which distinguished population according to confession and ethnicity that frequently overlapped.⁴⁹ In this way the political communities were determined by their non-territorial ethno-religious identity.⁵⁰

The Ottoman citizenship project, as Sarajlić argues, had the opposite effect: instead of establishing common nationality, it reinforced the millet distinctions it aimed to reduce.⁵¹ In Bosnia and Herzegovina the concept of political membership based on confessional identities was formally institutionalized for the first time under Austria-Hungary by the Land Statute of Bosnia-Herzegovina from 1910. Political membership based on confessional membership thus became a pre-condition for getting access to collective rights.⁵²

Almost ninety years later after the Austro-Hungarian Statute for Bosnia, the post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina is divided on similar, ethnic principles, facing

⁴⁸ See Bakić-Hayden, “Kosovo”, 143.

⁴⁹ Dino Abazović, *Religija u tranziciji* (Sarajevo: Rabic, 2010), 45-46.

⁵⁰ Marc Weller and Stefan Wolff (eds.), *Self-governance and Conflict Resolution* (London, New York: Routledge, 2005), 15.

⁵¹ Paraphrased; Eldar Sarajlić, “A Citizenship Beyond the Nation-State: Dilemmas of the ‘Europeanisation’ of Bosnia and Herzegovina”, *CITSEE Working Paper 2010/09*, 4. Available at: http://www.citsee.ed.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/108871/232_acitizenshipbeyondthenationstatedilemmasoftheuropeanisationofbosniaandherzegovi.pdf.

⁵² Abazović, *Religija u tranziciji*, 46.

a number of issues related to political membership and identities. The current Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina⁵³ strengthened further ethno-centrism at the sub-state level and introduced new issues in understanding the political membership. Membership in the state (citizenship) is based on membership in entity (entity citizenship), and entities have been initially constructed on a principle of ethnic belonging (although the Constitutional Court made all citizens equal throughout BiH). The ethno-political constitutional framework excludes 'others' and privileges three constitutive nations (Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks). The concept of political community is structured on ethnicity, while ethnicity is defined by religious belonging. This introduced a number of conceptual problems and confusion in understanding of political membership, opening the door for "confessional homogenization"⁵⁴, which since the 1990s has been intertwined with ethnic homogenisation. As Blagojević further argues, the latter would be difficult to accomplish without the former.

In BiH the position of Bosnian Muslims has changed historically within several different states established on this territory. The Islamic faith community, established in 1882, became a "unique religious organisation"⁵⁵ and from 1947 a central body for all Muslims in Yugoslavia on the territory of Yugoslavia. The Central Committee of the League of Communists of BiH declared Bosnian Muslims (as well as the Muslims from all territories of Yugoslavia) as a "full-fledged nationality,"⁵⁶ and introduced "nationality with a religious name"⁵⁷ – Muslims were treated as a nationally undeclared group until the Census in 1971, when the ethnic name Muslim (not to be confused with 'muslim' as a religious category) was included in the census.⁵⁸ This has caused certain inner "frictions" in self-perception of Muslims 'dividing them' into two streams: those who perceived the new term in a secular sense and as a marker of national identity, and those who saw it as inseparable from religious – Muslim identity.⁵⁹ Fractions such as Young Muslims, led by Alija Izetbegović in the 1970s, argued that Islam is inseparable from the Muslim national identity.⁶⁰ Since Muslims, as Perica points out, "did not have myths of their own" of being "aliens in their native land"⁶¹, they have been "unequal partners in the

⁵³ Annex 4: Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, University of Minnesota, Human Rights Library. Available at: <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/icty/dayton/daytonannex4.html>.

⁵⁴ Mirko Blagojević, "Revitalisation of Religion and Dialogue" in Milan Vukomanović and Marinko Vucinić, (eds.), *Religious Dialogue in the Balkans: the Drama of Understanding* (Beograd: Belgrade Open School), 218. Available at: http://veraznanjemir.bos.rs/materijal/knjige/religious_dialogue.pdf#page=218.

⁵⁵ Abazović, *Religija u tranziciji*, 81.

⁵⁶ Perica, *Balkan Idols*, 75.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Abazović, *Religija u tranziciji*, 12.

⁵⁹ Paraphrased. Ibid, 76.

⁶⁰ For wider discussion see Ibid, 76-77.

⁶¹ Ibid, 74

religious-nationalist competition in Yugoslavia.”⁶² Alija Izetbegović’s group Young Muslims “envisioned a new Muslim national identity in which religion would play a key role”⁶³, which at the time did not reach a wider audience but secured its author a place in prison and a certain prestige at the moment of first democratic elections in 1990, which eventually brought him to power.

The Islamic Community was a pan-Yugoslav, multi-ethnic federation of autonomous institutions that covered ethnic Slavic Muslims, Albanians, Turks, and included some of the *Sufi* orders, differently from the Christian churches that were strongly linked to their ethnic communities.⁶⁴ In the 1980s with the expansion of Serbian and Croatian nationalism the issue of national identity became central for Bosnian Muslims as well.⁶⁵ Lacking cultural institutions, the Islamic Community became for Bosnian Muslims what Abazović called a “surrogate of national community”⁶⁶ until the late 1980s, when political parties that were representing the interests of Bosnian Muslims were formed. With the escalation of the war and the aggression against BiH, re-structuring of both national and political identity took place.⁶⁷

The name “Bosniak” was in official use from 1993 for determination of a political and national group, while the term Muslim retained its original meaning and has been used again only as a religious category.⁶⁸ The term Bosniak replaced the term Muslim as an ethnic category first in the changes and amendments to the Constitutional Law of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, to be later inserted into the Constitution of BiH.⁶⁹ These initial changes, according to Abazović, took place at the time when the “Owen-Stoltenberg plan” was proposed. Therefore, when speaking about Bosnian Muslims and Bosniak identity, it is important to understand it within the specific context of BiH, where Serbian and Croatian nationalism have also played a significant role: both Serb and Croat nationalists had territorial aspirations in Bosnia, including Serbia and Croatia as states; both groups have been traditionally claiming that Muslims are either ethnic Serbs or Croats converted to Islam. After the war in the 1990s, Islam in BiH “served as a tool of identity building of an ethnic community, rather than as a final destination of identity politics.”⁷⁰ Islamic Community certainly played an important role in establishing Bosniak national and cultural identity, and in that respect Islam in Bosnia had a “distinctly

⁶² Ibid, 75.

⁶³ Ibid, 77.

⁶⁴ Paraphrased. For more see: Ibid, 79.

⁶⁵ See Ibid, 86.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 12.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 13.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 97.

⁷⁰ Eldar Sarajlić, “The Return of the Consuls: Islamic networks and foreign policy perspectives in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, paper presented at the conference “After the Wahabi Mirage: Islam, politics and international networks in the Balkans”, organised by the European Studies Centre and University of Oxford, Oxford, 2010, 9. Available at: <http://balkanmuslims.com/pdf/Sarajlic-Bosnia.pdf>.

ethnic role”⁷¹, as Sarajlic points out. Religious language has been instrumentalised and used for political purposes, and a number of political parties and leaders affiliated themselves with religious institutions.

The 2013 census in BiH further expanded public debates on what is the relevant polity, who is a member, who belongs, and where? The dispute and discussions have been triggered over the issue of Bosnian identity as belonging to BiH as a state and as civic membership, and the question of ‘Bosniak or Bosnian’ became a matter of extensive public debates, especially among the Bosniak population. For religious leaders the concept of political membership remained inseparable from confessional identity, despite the fact that public opinion has been divided on this issue. Faced with the prospect that many Bosniaks, especially in big cities, resent ethnic and religious categories and are ready to declare themselves as only Bosnians, and thus reaffirm their loyalty to the state of BiH rather than to any particular ethnic or religious group, the Islamic Community in BiH encouraged its members to declare themselves as Bosniaks ethno-nationally and as ‘Muslims’ religiously. One can notice certain tendencies such as for instance that the term Bosniak should stand for one nation of BiH, which is differentiated only by religious belonging but not by ethnicity, which Eldar Sarajlic criticised as being “nationalism of Bosniak anti-nationalists.”⁷² The other stream insists on the term Bosniak as a specific ethnic category that is based on traditional Islamic identity, but is at the same time open for those Bosniaks of Muslim background that do not practice Islam.

For the religious leaders nation-building became one of the major political tasks, and in that respect ethnoclericalism did not bypass the Islamic Community. Mustafa Cerić, since becoming a leader of the Islamic Community has been a strong advocate of religious, cultural and political sovereignty of the Bosniak nation. However the issue of Bosniak nationhood has been expended by Cerić onto the other territories of former Yugoslavia and Muslims in those territories. Just before the census in Montenegro in 2011, Mustafa Cerić together with Sandzak Mufti Muamer Zukorlić, appealed to Montenegrin Muslims to declare themselves as Bosniaks of Islamic faith.⁷³ Although Cerić and Zukorlić argued that all Muslims in Former Yugoslavia share specific national-cultural identity, opinions remain divided: for Montenegrin Muslims for instance, the choice between Bosniak and Muslim, has imposed a number of dilemmas, as well as in Sandžak.⁷⁴

Narratives structured around the issue of Bosniak nationhood have been predominantly narratives about the suffering and genocide. They have been widely exploited by religious leaders in order to deliver an important political message, for

⁷¹ Ibid, 8.

⁷² Eldar Sarajlić, “Blentavi nacionalizam Besima Spahica”, *Radio Sarejevo*, 2 April 2012. Available at: <http://www.radiosarajevo.ba/novost/77940/eldar-sarajlic-blentavi-nacionalizam-besima-spahica>.

⁷³ “Zukorlić i Cerić: Na popis kao Bošnjaci”, *Vesti*, 27 June 2011. Available at: <http://www.kurir-info.rs/zukorlic-i-ceric-na-popis-kao-bosnjaci-clanak-81243>.

⁷⁴ Bohdana Dimitrovova, “Bosniak or Muslim? Dilemma of one Nation with two Names”, *Southeast European Politics*, II:2 (2001), 94-108. Available at: <http://www.seep.ceu.hu/issue22/dimitrovova.pdf>.

instance on several occasions Mustafa Cerić as well as Muarek Zukorlić reminded Bosniaks of genocide in Srebrenica, in order to emphasise the importance of building a strong nation as a prevention of any 'future atrocities.' The World Bosniak Congress, a recently established organisation based in Sarajevo and led by Mustafa Cerić, whose primary political aim is unification and strengthening of Bosniak national and cultural identity in BiH, Balkans and diaspora, used exactly the same narrative of suffering in its Declaration: "This is the voice of the Pan-Bosniak reason that needs to be heard because the Bosniak soul can no longer listen to the crying of the innocent child who asks why it had to be killed by those who have no soul at all."⁷⁵

One of the aims of the Congress as outlined in the Declaration is to promote the truth about Bosniaks sovereign nation and to establish and develop the line of defence against all possible threats to Bosniak people.⁷⁶ The Congress further supports development of national institutions, such as the Bosniak Academy of Sciences and Arts, and supports international collaboration, through the membership of BiH in the Organisation for the Islamic cooperation.⁷⁷ The Congress also recognizes the importance of the Islamic Community for national identity of Bosniaks and "will preserve the reputation of Umma", paying special respect to Reis-Ul-Ulema.⁷⁸

Religion and the Islamic Community in Bosnia, where ethno-confessional identity is a basis of political membership, has been important for debates on Bosniak national identity and Islamic Community proved as one of the significant political agents. The politics that brings all Muslims from the territories of former Yugoslavia under the cap of 'Bosniak' is possibly the most ambitious political project that Islamic Community has supported in the recent history. However it is important to notice that this trans-border nation-building expands to other sovereign states in order to appeal to a political community of a specific confessional-Islamic-tradition. In that respect Islamic Community shows the similar understanding of political membership as the neighbouring churches: ethno-confessional belonging is a pre-condition of trans-border membership but also a guarantee of a strong political community.

4 Conclusion

In this paper I argued that the issue of identity is at the core of the triadic nexus of political community, ethnic belonging and religious affiliation. The question of identity has been essential for membership and definitions of who belongs and how. Religion and religious institutions have significant influence and impact on the concepts of political membership and of the understanding of a polity. Religious institutions have been having a similar role and influence on political communities in

⁷⁵ <http://www.sbk.eu.com/dokumenta/constitutive-declaration/>.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

three different contexts in which the concepts of citizenship have been interpreted as multi-ethnic, ethnocentric and civic: religion has been the main indicator of ethnic identity and one of the major tools for nation-building. Although both religions that I discussed in this paper are nominally *universal* they have been reduced in this context to *ethnic*.

Furthermore, religious institutions have been a main resource of identitarian narratives, whose aim is strengthening the sense of ethno-religious belonging of the members of a particular polity. These narratives have been often structured against the 'Other', or in other words against everyone who do not belong to a particular ethno-religious group. The ethno-religious narratives have been symbolically embedded in the state and political symbols and rituals. In that sense religion and religious nationalism (ethnophyletism) have been a source of ethno-centrism, both on state and sub-state levels and a political agent that defines the criteria of who can be a member in an ethno-national community.

I argued that by supporting the formation of 'ethno-confessional polities' religious institutions have replaced *universalism* with ethnic nationalism that spills over the new borders and frequently aims to redefine polities and demos in the new successor states. This is the issue that is directly linked to citizenship and that has played a part in shaping some of the citizenship regimes. For instance, in the Montenegrin case, the issue of dual citizenship has been used to counteract the tendencies of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian political elites to influence and shape the identity of the political community in Montenegro – as a consequence dual citizenship is not tolerated.

We can find a number of similarities between the different religious communities who *de facto* appeal to members of the other state (in the Serbian case, Kosovo) as to the members of their own political community. Although religious communities have not been limited to state/national boundaries, their appeal to members of the other state is not of religious character but directed towards strengthening of ethno-national identity, which consequently may create an alienation from the state to which a member officially belongs. As I stressed before, it is the triadic nexus of political community, ethnic belonging and religious affiliation that enables constitutional nationalism in otherwise secular (and not religious) constitutions and states.

Blending of ethnicity and religiosity is present in elements of citizenship laws, and moreover in the definitions of membership to the ethnic nation that owns the state and creates these citizenship laws: it denies practically and politically equal political membership to those outside the core ethnic groups, which in the 1990s had forms of open discrimination, while today it is an implicit discrimination resulting in diminishing of political rights and participation.



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